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Stratifications, Folds, De-stratifications

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Stratification and Diagrammatic Storytelling

An Encounter with “Under the Dome”

Jon McKenzie

To live means to finesse the processes to which one is subjugated.

Bertolt Brecht

My long-term, applied performance research project is called StudioLab, for it mixes seminar, studio, and lab learning — experiments in theory, design, and media that produce essays, videos, lecture performances, and through DesignLab, a design consultancy with workshops, media studios, and smart media forms and practices. My current research focuses on diagrammatic storytelling and mixed performativities within the context of performance design and tactical media or intimate activist technologies (see Kavaloski, 2015). Diagrammatic storytelling operates through refrains of asignifying semiotics which in combination with discursive and symbolic events constitute layers or strata of mixed performativities. These emergent layers can be mapped and choreographed but never mastered. The encounter here with Chai Jing’s 2015 documentary, *Under the Dome*, is stratoanalytic in its orientation, while at the same time diagrammatic storytelling and mixed performativities provide approaches to strata, folds, and the disorienting effects of destratification.

Performances, Diagrams, Strata

Once upon a time I drew this diagram of strata within strata. It is the diagram of the general theory of performance rehearsed in *Perform or Else* (McKenzie 2001) and at other sites. A crash course: 3) subjects and objects are stratified by the binding of discursive performatives and embodied performances, through processes described

by 2) different performance research paradigms or stratification machines: cultural, organizational, technological, financial, medical, educational, and beyond. All are built upon 1) an onto-historical stratum of performative power and knowledge first surveyed by Marcuse and Lyotard, one that is displacing the disciplinary stratum analyzed by Foucault. Deleuze calls



1. Performance Stratum
2. Performance Paradigms
3. Performance-Performative Blocks

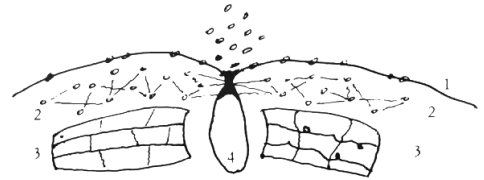
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this stratum “societies of control,” Virilio “dromosphere,” and Hardt & Negri “Empire.” If you are reading these words and images in the 21st century, you learned to read on the emerging performance stratum. This first diagram is composed with bits and pieces of a second diagram, one Deleuze drew up to map Foucault’s theory of stratification. At different scales, strategic zones emerge between strata and the outside, punctuated by folds where zones of resonance, attraction, and repulsion emerge and dissolve, and where negative, positive, and recursive feedback loops take shape.

One can read this second diagram by overlaying it at different scales on the first and zooming in and out of its embedded stratifications.



1. Line of the outside
2. Strategic zone
3. Strata
4. Fold (zone of subjectivation)

Zooming way in, the fold appears between performance–performative blocks of embodied practices and discursive statements. This is the fold of subjectization, the carving out of interiority by refrains of the outside. Zooming out a bit, the fold appears between different paradigms — or sociotechnical systems in general: disciplines, fields, organizations, institutions actively maintaining border patrol. This is fold of sociotechnics, the twisting and shaping of bodies and environments through different spatiotemporal arrangements of bodies, spaces, environments, etc.

Zooming way, way out, the fold appears between different onto–historical strata, different formations of power/knowledge. This is the fold of long and wide histories, of diachronic and synchronic distributions. Today we perform in the fold or turn between disciplinary and performance strata, between humanism and what we awkwardly call the *posthuman*, the *non-human*, the *anthropocene*. Long accustomed to understanding the world, we actually, virtually, undergo it at levels far below and above consciousness.

Though they operate at different scales, these diagrams of strata, folds, and lines of flight are all embedded within one another. We feel the turning of worlds in our bodies and navigate their passageways in relationships and interactions, in our thoughts, our fantasies, our nightmares. Strange as it may seem, these diagrams are not representational but existential, not symbolic but indexical, not constative but performative, though performative in an uncertain environmental sense that I have elsewhere evoked in terms of the *performative*, following Derrida in “Ulysses Gramophone.” These diagrams before you — in whatever medium — are surrounded and embedded by other sights, sounds, smells, and feelings around, within, and without you. Somehow, somehow they beckon and call you forth — or turn you away.

Let us zoom in finally on the strategic zone of Deleuze’s diagram where intensities and flows encounter stratified blocks. We are interested in how these stratifications and destratifications “communicate” or rather *resonate* across scales. How, for instance, do micro-level gestures resonate with macro-level events and how does dissonance rise and fall across different thresholds? Protests and occupations often begin with local gestures and chants capable of triggering subtle or seismic structural changes — and also capable of being captured and defanged by stratifying machines of the state and mainstream media. How to expand the repertoire or database of resonant critical performances?

Storytelling Up and “Under the Dome”

Since 2011, I have directed DesignLab, a media design consultancy at the University of

Wisconsin–Madison. DesignLab’s mission is to democratize digitality by democratizing design, and we focus on emerging scholarly genres, what we call *smart media*. Smart media include performance lectures, Pecha Kucha, installations, scientific posters, and theory comix. In June, 2015, DesignLab developed a smart media workshop as part of anthropologist George Marcus’ visit to Madison. Marcus’ fieldwork has focused on elites — the World Bank, Tonga nobility, dynastic American families. This work is part of a broader line of ethnographic inquiry known as *studying up*, developed in the late 1960s by Laura Nader, who argued of the social urgency for anthropologists to analyze middle and upper social strata, including the life worlds of decision-makers and leaders.

Drawn to Marcus’ fieldwork and his work in design anthropology, DesignLab ran a recent workshop on “storytelling up.” Here the goal was less studying elites than experimenting with visual stories designed to inform and persuade them — to *storytell up*. Given the complex political and rhetorical situation facing our university, our workshop attracted instructors, students, as well as staff used to communicating with alumni, parents, and donors. We used a magazine cover exercise and participants mocked up designs for *The New Yorker*, *Time*, *National Geographic*, etc., with the goal of triggering specific effects — shock, concern, inquiry, or action — with their audience. These are light forms of intimate activist technologies.

I want to focus in on the smart media work that we screened in the workshop to learn more dynamic rhetorical techniques, for it storytells up in a dramatic fashion — and indeed can be also read as a type of applied theater or lecture performance. The work also demonstrates storytelling in a broad sense: from intimate personal stories to broad social histories to explanations of complex processes. The smart media is *Under the Dome*, a 2015 documentary film by Chai Jing, an independent Chinese journalist and former TV host. Released in late February, *Under the Dome* was quickly hailed in the West as China’s *An Inconvenient Truth*, for the 103-minute film exposed that nation’s ecological nightmare and did so through a TED-talk format of storytelling. Filmed before a live audience and made available for download in multiple languages, the online video had 150,000,000 views in China during its first week and received immediate critical attention around the world. *Time* named Chai Jing one of The Most Influential People of the Year. *Under the Dome* demonstrates the power of storytelling up: Chai both shows and tells, demonstrates and narrates scores of stories while employing an array of rhetorical tools: personal stories, official histories, interviews, testimonials but also data and graphs, conceptual stories, argument and evidence — all choreographed and performed before a live audience. It transmits the force of visual storytelling, whether it be film, theater, information design, PPT — all of which *Under the Dome* incorporates into its de-stratifying effects.

Returning to the three folds — subjective, social, and ecological — *Under the Dome* revolves around stories of China’s pollution, political and business malfeasance, and Chai’s own intimate story of giving birth and raising a child with cancer. Sonograms of her daughter, data trends of particulate matter, interviews with government officials: through these and innumerable other juxtapositions, levels of strata collide, their folds momentarily align, and de-stratifying resonance erupts across scales. *Under the Dome* ain’t pretty: it’s dark, gray, and unrelenting in its revelations. Perhaps for this reason, Chai Jing positions herself rhetorically using the dyads of mother/child, nation/environment in order to resonate with *hundreds of millions* in a highly mediatized public space: just as Chai must care for her child, so too China must care for its environment. Are there other possible constellations, other displacements? Innumerable.

From the perspective of tactical media, the destratifying force of Chai's storytelling up lies precisely the polyphonic, multimediated eruption of lower, abject forces into higher social strata, into public and official discourses. *Under the Dome* gathers dark gray and blue clouds over an immense political and personal landscape from which Chai orchestrates a storm of materials illuminated by a series of lightning strikes, *strikes from the ground up*. Such bolts of clarity speaks truth to power, show/tells its configuration, and thus indexes destratification. And it does so at scale: 150,000,000 views in China, all in one week.

*Diagrammatic storytelling up entails showing and telling
and diagramming one's story for others, autopoetically
modeling-building-trying out-evaluating one's own story*

And then suddenly, in early March, days after the film's release, the Chinese government ordered that *Under the Dome* be taken down from Chinese servers. Lightning is fast. The official who leaked the order was subsequently removed from office. In the end

(that's the beginning), the web both quickens and thickens time and space. Chai Jing's *Under the Dome* remains available outside China in different translations on YouTube.

Diagrammatic Storytelling and Machinic Performativity

Over the past decade, a huge visual storytelling field has emerged, driven by TED talks, corporate pitches, and fields such as graphic medicine, where organizations such as the Healthy Aboriginal Network translates and localizes medical knowledge into comics for specific at-risk communities. Visual storytelling is not restricted to traditional storytelling and historical narrative but also includes data storytelling, conceptual storytelling, and strategic storytelling. This storytelling is often spoken off monitors and sometimes amplified through speakers. Music is rare. The visual component may include screen, projection, staging and props, and storyteller or presenter whose voice comportment and gestures meld the aural and visuality, the stratifying of performatives and performances that constitute processes of subjectivation.

Maurizio Lazzarato's *Signs and Machines* (2014) tightens our focus on diagrams and their relation to performativity and subjectivation. *Signs and Machines* theorizes the capitalization of immaterial labor and production of subjectivity at the level of the sign, explicitly rebooting the poststructuralist critique of logocentrism. Lazzarato does so not through Derridean grammatology but the diagrammatic semiotics of Deleuze's collaborator Felix Guattari, using Guattari's assignifying "diagrammatics" to target both Saussure's sign and Austin's performative, especially the performative's use by Rancière, Badiou, and Butler. For Lazzarato, such focus on processes of subjectivation remains on the level of language and individual subject formation and thus fails to address *machinic enslavement*, power that operates at both sub- and supra-individual levels through non-linguistic, non-representational operator-signs, such as diagrams, algorithms, models, and data flows. Such diagrammatic signs function directly in the world and affect our lives at scales and speeds beneath and beyond human consciousness. This assignifying semiotic forms a machinic infrastructure for embodied performances and discursive performatives. The diagrammatic is not representational but fully operational, not a picture but an engine that runs between humans and machines and more primordially, between machines and machines. For the ecologist Guattari, nature is itself machinic, composed of flows and breaks and nonlinear, recursive processes. Our familiar technological forms emerge from machinic phyla in feedback with their human operators.

Indeed, *capitalization captures the surplus value of machinic flows precisely through the linearization and coding of asignifying elements into a world of words, bodies, and commodities*. This is how machinic enslavement operates at a molecular level. Beneath surveillance and ideology: dataveillance and a microphysics of control. Significantly, although Lazzarato targets Austin's performative for missing the molecular flows of machinic enslavement, Lyotard's theory of performativity can help us tune in Lazzarato's contribution to our understanding of strata, folds, and destratification. Bridging micro- and macro-scales, Lyotard defines performativity as the legitimization of knowledge and social bonds via optimization of *input/output matrices*; that is, precisely through diagrammatic semiotics, the very pragmatics of machinic enslavement. All knowledge and social relations bend to what I will call the *machinic performativity* of inputs and outputs, debits and credits, costs and revs. Overlaying the performance diagrams of Lyotard, Lazzarato, and Marcuse, a pattern flashes:

machinic enslavement
 ~is~
postmodern performativity
 ~is~
performance as alienated labor

Over the last half-century, both labor and management have been nanosized, automated, and outsourced through human-computer interactions, communications networks, automated manufacturing, data mining, and an host of other machinic controls. Assessment regimes, mission statements, grand narratives, and other performative events occur atop this infrastructural performativity. *Perform or else* — this remains the postmodern condition of Indebted, One-Dimensional Men and Women, and yet the terms and diagrams of this imperative escape both the challenger and the challenged. What to do with the call of machinic performativity? Is there no escape from imperatives that themselves escape us?

In terms of tactical media, Lazzarato (2014: 242-243) calls for the invention of new, auto-referential subjectivities and suggests two tactics. First, he counters Ranciere's language-based, theatrical model of ethics with another performance tradition, that of the Cynics, which "make us think of contemporary art performances" whose "'performative' techniques . . . call on a multiplicity of semiotics". These "mixed semiotics" include gestures, actions, clothing, props, and physical presence. Lazzarato then calls for using images "diagrammatically" to engage machinic enslavement, power that operates at both sub- and supra-individual levels through non-linguistic, non-representational operator-signs, such as diagrams, algorithms, models, and data flows. How might we perform at both macro and micro-levels, with a variety of semiotics, both human and non-human? Significantly, Lazzarato (2014: 137) cites the image-language of art, science, and industry:

Science, industry, and art have used the image 'diagrammatically' for a long time. Computer-assisted imagery, for example, captures, as in a dynamic diagram, the functional articulations of situation or system which it allows one to anticipate, forecast, and intervene.[...] Society maintains the possibility of using the cinema and its images as science uses diagrams and microscopes to 'see' the infinitely small or the telescope to 'see' the infinitely large that escapes man and his language in order to construct 'iconic cartographies' that multiply possibilities for action. Like a diagram in motion, the cinema: in order to see, decide, choose, and act.

The Cynics — and Diogenes, in particular — were known for refuting verbal arguments with cutting remarks and base often vulgar physical displays, much like contemporary performance artists and, significantly, satirical comedians and TV hosts. *All storytell up*. Can we imagine Diogenes performing diagrammatically today?

Future Research

Within the larger context of StudioLab research, I am interested in ways that experimental forms of theory, media, and design can contribute to *diagrammatic storytelling*, storytelling composed of mixed semiotics that can also be understood and practiced as *mixed performativities*, as the orchestration of discursive, embodied, and machinic events. We see such orchestration or conduction of mixed performativities in the complex landscape of effects, images, and words that make up *Under the Dome*. Diagrammatic storytelling up entails *showing* and *telling* and *diagramming* one's story for others, autopoetically modeling-building-trying out-evaluating one's own story, of throwing one's bits out there and being drawn back in, over and over, with others and other others and no one at all, all the while acting as a lightning rod for conducting collective thought and action.

We can also find diagrammatic storytelling and mixed performativities in countless other smart media genres, ranging from scientific posters to corporate PowerPoints to experimental lecture performances to TV weather reports. It's all a matter of tuning them in, reverse-engineering their operations, and redeploying them at scale. How to remix the performances of diagrams, bodies, and words? How to navigate strata and their folds and move to their rhythms and breaks? The challenge for us as an ecosystem: *How might diagrammatic storytelling help reveal the mixed performativities of global stratification?* and *How might it open wiser paths of destratification?*

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